

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – March 3, 2019

[Luke 9:28-45](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](#).)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Luke 9:28-45

(From *Homiletics*; “The Moon Shot Effect”, March 3, 2019)

Jesus’ transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36; Mark 9:2-10; Matthew 17:1-9) is electric with mystery and anticipation. On this last Sunday *before* Lent, we appreciate that the Synoptic Gospels place Jesus’ transfiguration a week after his first prediction of his suffering, rejection, execution and resurrection (v. 22). And shortly *after* the event, Jesus told his disciples, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands” (v. 44b). In verse 51b, Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” where these things would transpire. Our passage also closely follows Peter’s “Great Confession” in verse 20b: “[You are] the Messiah [or Christ] of God.”

Let’s take to heart Fred Craddock’s warning, in his *Luke* (*Interpretation*-series) commentary, that we who preach will be tempted to trivialize the meaning of the combined transfiguration event and the following incident (vv. 37-43a — the inability of Jesus’ other disciples, in Jesus’ absence, to restore a boy’s health) by contrasting the “mountaintop experience” with the realities of being in the valley of everyday life. As Craddock says: “[H]old [such passages] before the listeners in their full extraordinariness rather than reduce them to fit the contours of our experiences.” We can lead our listeners to linger at the mountain “in awe of [the significance of the experience’s] mystery and power” (see pages 132-33).

The parallel Matthew 17:2a and Mark 9:2b texts say: “And [Jesus] was transfigured before them.” Μεταμορφωω is a cognate of our word “metamorphosis.” In its Luke 9 context, the verb means to change visibly into another form. In other contexts, e.g., Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18, it means (sometimes with eschatological expectation) our inner spiritual transformation into the Lord’s image.

The mountain of transfiguration (a “high mountain” in Mark and Matthew) is Mount Tabor (1,886 feet) west of the Sea of Galilee, or Mount Hermon (9,232 feet), north of the Sea, on the border between modern Syria and Lebanon.

Luke emphasizes Jesus’ practice of praying before significant events (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 22:32, 44 ff.). Here (vv. 28-29) it was *while he was praying* on the mountain that “the appearance of his face changed [was transformed], and his clothes became dazzling white.” “Face” means not only one’s literal face, but also, with abundant biblical antecedent, the Lord’s *transcendent presence*. His clothes “became dazzling white” (*NRSV*, *NLT*, *NAB*). *NIV*: “... became as bright as a flash of lightning.” *CEB*: “ ... flashed white like lightning.” Cf. Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:13.

First-century listeners familiar with stories in the Scriptures would have instantly come to full attention upon hearing this story. They would have been transported in memory to events from the lives of Moses and Elijah on Mount Horeb/Sinai, where God's powerful presence showed up in life-transforming ways. In Exodus 19:16, "There was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain." In Exodus 20:18, "When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled." In Exodus 24:16, "The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it." When Moses came down from the mountain, "the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (Exodus 34:29). God entrusted Moses with conveying his *torah* (law and instruction).

A prophet is one who makes known something from God — sometimes about the future, but even more about his expectations of (1) loyalty to the Lord alone and to walking in his ways, and of (2) rightly treating people. Elijah, the exemplary prophet, also had a theophanic experience on that mountain (see 1 Kings 19), where God spoke to him. Moses and Elijah are associated elsewhere in Scripture: See Malachi 4:4-6 and the more oblique Revelation 11 (where they may be the two witnesses). In NT thinking, "the law and the prophets" sums up God's revelations and expectations up to the time of Jesus; e.g., see 16:16 ("The law and the prophets were in effect until John [the Baptizer] came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed ..."; 24:44; Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 22:37-40; John 1:45; Acts 24:14; 28:23; Romans 3:21).

Jesus had taken only Peter, John and James (Jesus' inner circle of disciples — see 8:51) up the mountain with him. They had been nodding off (as in 22:45-46), but were startled to full wakefulness when Moses and Elijah suddenly "appeared in *glory*" (emphasis added) with Jesus (see Luke 9:31-32 and Exodus 24:12-18 above). "Glory" (*kabod* — pronounced *kah-VOHD*) is used in the OT to express the weighty, intensely bright, majestic presence of the awe-inspiring God. See also "cloud" below. Given the juxtaposition of verses, Jesus' transfiguration may fulfill 9:27. Glory is paradoxically associated in the NT with the suffering of Jesus and his followers; e.g., see the fuller chapter 9 passage; 24:26; Acts 3:18-21; Romans 8:15-18; Hebrews 2:9-10; 1 Peter 1:3-6, 10-11.

Moses and Elijah were speaking with Jesus about "his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:31). "Departure" is ἐξοδος (from which we get our word "exodus"). God's most memorable redemptive act in the OT is the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt and subsequent safe passage through the sea toward the Promised Land. God's comparable redemptive act in the NT is the deliverance of sinful humankind from sin and death through Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension/glorification. See 2 Peter 1:15 where the writer (traditionally the apostle Peter) speaks of his own departure (ἐξοδος!); he then refers (vv. 16-18) to his being an eyewitness to the transfiguration experience.

As Moses and Elijah were leaving, outspoken Peter blurted out something about making three dwellings/tents, using the Greek word σκηνή (pronounced *skay-NAY*), which Septuagint/LXX Greek often uses to translate a common Hebrew word for "tabernacle" (*mishkan*). The tabernacle and later temple were the places where God was especially present with his people. Peter may have been attempting to *capture* the awe-filled experience which could be fully realized only *later* in the life of Jesus and of his followers (at Jesus' ascension/being at the right hand of God and at our ultimate glorification with Jesus Christ — as Acts 1:8-11; 7:54-56; 1 Corinthians 15:42-52; 2 Corinthians 4:15-18; Colossians 3:1-4; 1 Peter 5:1-2; Titus 2:11-15).

Even as Peter was getting his words out, "a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud" (v. 34). Clouds and smoke, often accompanied by fright, are part of the experience of God's people in the awe-inspiring presence of the Lord God. See Exodus 20:18 above; 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8-9-11; Isaiah 6:1-8; Acts 1:8-11. From the cloud God spoke to the apostles, "This is my Son, my Chosen [other Greek texts have "the one I love"]; listen to him!" (9:35). God had spoken to Jesus similarly at his baptism (3:22). Jesus' followers were/are to *listen to/obey his Son Jesus, his Chosen, his Messiah/Christ, his spokesman*. In Deuteronomy 18:15-18, God had indeed promised a prophet like Moses (see Acts 3:18-22; 7:37-38).

The text in 9:37-50 reminds us that Jesus' followers have more to learn about faith, being "astounded at the greatness of God" (v. 43), suffering and becoming childlike. But we can look to the transfiguration as good news: We are privileged to have glimpses of glory which sustain us as we walk with Jesus, setting our own faces toward Jerusalem.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

Reflection Questions on Luke 9:28-45

1. An obvious and surface level question immediately confronts us re: the story of the Transfiguration – Did this really happen? Or was it just a dream? Or a legend? Or a hyperbolic embellishment of an indescribable experience? Or an intentional literary invention designed to connect Jesus with Moses and Elijah? Perhaps another question is actually more important – Does it matter whether or not this really happened? Why or why not?
2. The story of the Transfiguration tells of an experience of a “change” that came over Jesus. Each of the synoptic gospels tells the story a bit differently and from a different angle. Compare and contrast Luke’s version of the story (and its context) with Matthew (16:24-28) and Mark (8:34-9:1). What is the nature of the change that comes to Jesus in each (beyond the surface level)?
3. A lot more is going on than just the Transfiguration in this passage as given for today! The Revised Common Lectionary actually focuses on the Transfiguration alone (vv. 28-36), with the healing of the boy with a demon an optional supplement (vv. 37-43a). But today we add Jesus foretelling his death as well (vv.43b-45). So...what (if anything) is the significance of this sequence? Is there a deeper connection between these three moments other than sequencing?
4. What is going on in verse 41, where Jesus answered a plea for help with the phrase, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?” Is this just an inside look into a full human Jesus when he is feeling grumpy? Or is there some significance to these words?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?